

This record is a partial extract of the original cable. The full text of the original cable is not available.

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 AMMAN 001971

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

STATE FOR NEA/RA LAWSON AND OES/PCI SHAW

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [SENV](#) [IS](#) [JO](#)

SUBJECT: Jordanian-Israeli Desert Research "Bridging the Rift" Project Opens Chasm of Criticism

1. (U) This is a joint Embassy Amman/Embassy Tel Aviv message.

2. (SBU) SUMMARY. With great fanfare, Israeli and Jordanian officials as well as private Israeli and U.S. financial backers laid the cornerstone of the "Bridging the Rift" (BTR) cooperative research facility in barren Wadi Araba on March 9. With scores of Arab, Israeli and international media recording the event, Jewish-American businessman Mati Kochavi, the founder and CEO of BTR, spoke of his dream to create a hub for technology, research, and education for all people in the Middle East. Separate events -- highly publicized in Israel -- were also held with Prime Minister Sharon and King Abdullah. Stanford and Cornell Universities are affiliated with BTR and will eventually offer PhDs through the project. Israeli Minister of the Treasury Netanyahu and Minister of Education Livnat lauded the initiative. Their Jordanian counterparts, Minister of Planning Awadallah and Minister of Education Toukan, while strongly supportive in their public remarks, made pointed reference to the need for mutual acceptance, justice, Palestinian rights and freedoms, and "bridging rifts, not building walls."

3. (SBU) While the events received positive treatment in the Israeli press, there was decidedly negative reaction on the Jordanian side, including a call by 20 members of parliament, mostly Islamists, March 14 for the impeachment of three ministers who participated in the inauguration ceremony. Jordan's Arabic press, trade unions, and professional associations criticized the government for entering into such a collaborative arrangement with Israel, given the current political climate and public sympathy for the plight of the Palestinians. The King's publicized reception of the private members of the group in Amman appeared to mute the opposition temporarily. An admirable goal, BTR probably will not be up and running for several years, but this week's launch should help to raise awareness of the project and, more importantly, funds from private benefactors. Although the center could serve to stress the mutual benefits of the Jordan-Israel relationship, the maneuver by some in Parliament adds to recent strains, including the cancellation of Israeli Foreign Minister Shalom's visit to Jordan. END SUMMARY.

-----  
REPLACING A BORDER WITH A BRIDGE  
-----

4. (SBU) On an extraterritorial parcel of real estate, comprising equal amounts of land given to the Bridging the Rift (BTR) project by Jordan and Israel and negotiated between the two countries' officials over the past several years, BTR officials intend to build a world-class scientific research institution, focusing on life sciences and desert environments. A Madison Avenue-style laying of the campus cornerstone took place on March 9 in the company of senior government officials from Jordan and Israel, as well as the BTR's American and Israeli founders and financial backers. The star-studded audience also included former Congressman Jack Kemp, General (ret.) Tommy Franks, Cornell President Jeffrey Lehman, Stanford Vice Provost Arthur Bienenstock and numerous prestigious academics, including Stanford's Paul Ehrlich. Israeli Minister of the Treasury, Benjamin Netanyahu, was joined by Education Minister Limor Livnat to underscore Jerusalem's commitment to the project. Prime Minister Sharon had earlier that day hosted a breakfast for the BTR organizers and supporters in his Jerusalem residence. On the Jordanian side, Minister of Planning and International Cooperation Bassem Awadallah led the delegation that included Minister of Education Khaled Toukan, Minister of Higher Education Issam Zaabalawi, and representatives from the military, intelligence, business community, and academia. King Abdullah held a palace reception in Amman for the group that evening, although by mutual agreement the two Israeli ministers did not attend.

5. (SBU) "Working together to solve compelling scientific questions will require students to build bridges of trust

and interdependence," according to the BTR press release. BTR envisions overcoming political and ideological differences through collaborative scientific research. BTR's visionaries hope that students and scientists working with the center will themselves become bridges between Arab and Israeli societies.

-----  
BRIDGING RIFTS, NOT BUILDING WALLS  
-----

16. (SBU) These themes of coexistence were echoed by all of the featured speakers at the ceremony. From BTR founder Mati Kochavi to Bibi Netanyahu and Bassem Awadallah, each emphasized the need for healing divides, doing more for peace, and opening minds. Invoking the King Hussein/Rabin peace treaty signing in Wadi Araba 10 years ago, individuals spoke of King Abdullah's and Sharon's commitment to peace and to mechanisms, such as the BTR, that help to achieve it. Netanyahu joked about the BTR project finally offering some "good news from the Middle East." Awadallah put the BTR in the context of harnessing young talent, creating jobs, and developing Jordan economically. He said that Jordan has "much to learn from Israel," but used the podium to caution that Palestinian rights and freedoms must be respected. Calling for "bridging rifts, not building walls," Awadallah took a jab at Israel's physical security cordon snaking across parts of the West Bank. Toukan echoed those sentiments, talking of better understanding and mutual respect based on justice.

-----  
CHASM OF CRITICISM  
-----

17. (SBU) The Jordanian Islamic Action Front (IAF), the political wing of the Muslim Brotherhood, issued a written statement March 10 calling on the GOJ to halt construction of the research center. The IAF claimed that the center undermined Palestinian resistance against Israeli occupation forces and denigrated Jordanian sentiment opposed to any form of normalization with Israel. "We were shocked to learn that the cornerstone of a joint technological center between Jordan and the Zionist entity was laid yesterday and that it came at a time when the enemy [Israel] is intensifying its massacres against our Palestinian brethren," said the statement. The IAF further alleged that the gap between Arabs and Muslims and the "racist Zionist entity will not be bridged because it defies reality, history and dogma."

18. (SBU) Jordan's Higher Executive Committee for the Nation's Protection and Resistance to Normalization, comprising members from the country's opposition parties, trade unions, and professional associations, issued a statement on March 7, warning the government against "dangers posed by such a project."

19. (SBU) Jordanian Foreign Minister Muasher, responding from Washington to criticism about the BTR, used the press stakeout outside the State Department following his meeting with the Secretary March 9 to underscore that "the Jordanian/Israeli scientific project is not political." He added that "it is important to make progress on other fronts," far from politics, such as supporting such academic initiatives. The BTR "is not only Jordanian and Israeli, but also enjoys the participation of major U.S. universities," Muasher said, defending the project against attacks from Jordanian critics.

10. (SBU) In two separate stories, Al-Arab Al-Yawm reported that the IAF and the Jordanian Communist Party criticized Jordan for establishing the BTR center. The same sentiment was reflected in editorial commentaries in Al-Arab Al-Yawm by Chief Editor Taher Al-Adwan and moderate writer Jamil Al-Nimri, who argued that Jordan's diplomacy should aim to pressure Israel into stopping the massacres of Palestinians, the construction of the wall, and expelling Palestinians in the Occupied Territories from their land. Instead, this joint project rewards Israel for these acts. East Bank nationalist writer Nahed Hattar asked on March 11 if Jordan considered what the status of the center would be if Israel went ahead with a massive expulsion of Palestinians towards Jordan, or if it escalated its tension with Syria and Lebanon to the point of open conflict. The King's public association with the project appeared at first to mute the criticism. However, 16 IAF members joined by four independents called March 14 for a vote of no confidence for the three ministers who attended the cornerstone-laying ceremony. One MP called the inauguration ceremony "degrading" and accused the government of hiding plans for the center from the public. Other MP's defended the center, noting that it fell within the Jordan-Israel peace treaty. Planning Minister Awadallah said that many nations compete to have

"prestigious universities" such as Stanford and Cornell support such a center.

-----  
HEALING DIVIDES  
-----

11. (SBU) Jordan and Israel have jointly conceived and designed BTR from the outset, over the past four years. Defining the concept, vision, and research plan has been the task of the BTR committees in each country as well as an American one. Overcoming legal, security, and political obstacles, the BTR committees have brought the project to where it is today.

12. (SBU) The BTR center hopes to become a science and technology village, ultimately attracting the best young minds in the Middle East, although it is acknowledged that the first beneficiaries will be students from Jordan and Israel. Working on advanced research in the life sciences with special focus on desert environments, BTR is seeking to leverage its relationships with Stanford and Cornell Universities to offer PhDs through these institutions. BTR will take advantage of Stanford's and Cornell's significant investment in technology, science, intellectual property, data, and laboratories to boost its own capacity. The BTR center foresees three targets of opportunity: educating PhD students; providing research opportunities for post-docs; and developing business opportunities arising from the research.

13. (SBU) In the long term, BTR could begin to play a broader role in other topics of common concern throughout the region. It aspires to becoming a center of conflict resolution, bringing together leaders to consider creative solutions inspired by the spirit of BTR.

-----  
COMMENT: PEACE TREATY BUILDING BLOCKS  
-----  
-----

14. (SBU) It is no wonder that BTR, which if realized will represent a visible sign of Jordan's peace treaty with Israel, is a lightning rod for opponents of peace. The high-octane publicity strategy its proponents have chosen may assist in international fundraising, but it creates an easy target for anti-normalization elements. Similar collaborative initiatives, such as USAID's Middle East Regional Cooperation program or the Jordanian QIZ system with required Israeli content, also suffer from negative reactions and wildly distorted interpretations whenever they hit the radar screen of public opinion.

GNEHM